

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Shermuhamedov A.T.¹

Sidikova F.H.²

Zakirova G.H.³

¹²*Branch of Russian Economic University after G.V. Plekhanov in Tashkent*

³*Uzbek State World Languages University*

Abstract

It is generally acknowledged nowadays that culture and language are inseparable and there exists a direct connection between a culture and the language used by its members. Culture occupies a prominent position on the foreign language teaching agenda for the time being and the role of cultural learning has become one of the essential issues in foreign language teaching theory today. There are a lot of definitions of “culture” suggested by different authors from various perspectives. For us as teachers of English as a foreign language one of the most useful approaches in this context might be the definition provided by G. Hofstede who sees culture as “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. M. Seidl proposes to consider a concept of culture that links it to a language-oriented analysis that in turn defines culture in terms of the norms and values shared by the members of a social group. The author states “language proficiency, ... is a matter of familiarity with commonly held norms and values which constitute hidden meaning encoded in discourse structures”. She believes that when someone learns a foreign language and wants to understand another culture it is not enough to come to terms with another lexical or grammatical code. One has to view the world from a different perspective since speaking another language means adopting another point of view.

Keywords: *Language Learning, Intercultural Competence.*

MAIN PART

To choose the most promising approach seems to be of vital importance for language teachers nowadays for the traditional thought in foreign language education limits the teaching of culture to the transmission of information about the people of the target country and about their general attitudes and world views. And this approach turns out to be the least effective. It usually ignores the fact that a large part of what is called culture “is a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions”.

During the last decade or so, a general rethinking of the role of language as social practice has taken place. That suggests new ways of looking at the teaching of language and culture. Traditionally Foreign Language Teaching distinguishes between two types of competence: linguistic one (the knowledge of the internalized language of the code) and communicative one (the language

of how the internalized language of the code is appropriately acted upon).

Over the past ten or twenty years aspects of cultural behavior have been thoroughly researched, and this has led to a changing definition of competence in language learning. Initially, linguistic competence was replaced by communicative competence that emphasized the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. Today communicative competence is no longer regarded as complete without an awareness of the cultural dimension involved in interactions in a foreign language.

As M. Seidl states after having learned facts and figures about a target culture, students will not yet have acquired any cultural competence. They will not yet be able to put their knowledge to use according to convention. Learners are left unaware of the foreign attitudes and assumptions, which constitute the cultural identity of the definite foreign language group, and they have not learned much about their cultural identity. M

Seidl suggested completing the definition of communicative competence which can account for the interactive relationship between speakers of different languages and which is grounded in their different socio-cultural identities and acknowledges the ethnocentric viewpoint of each participant. The author introduced the term “intercultural competence” which combines both knowledge about culture and the ability to apply this knowledge, “... the aim of intercultural competence is not only to give learners an outsider’s perspective on their own personal situation but also to give them confidence as a “foreign” insider in another culture. It is not desirable to encourage learners to emulate the culture of the foreign language they learn, but they should be encouraged constantly to move from one point of view to the other.” Furthermore, being able to conform to the respective social conventions of a foreign culture demands the appropriate knowledge of different norms and values of this culture. According to J.P. Spradley, culture involves three fundamental aspects of human experience: what people do (cultural behavior), what people know (cultural knowledge), and what things people make and use (cultural artifacts), and to acquire it the following goals are to be encouraged: (a) establishing a “sphere of intercultural”, and (b) teaching culture as difference.

C. Kramsch proves that the link between linguistic forms and social structure has to be established. In a similar way understanding a foreign culture requires putting that culture in relation with one’s own. And an intercultural approach to the teaching of culture should include a reflection both on the target and on the native culture. S.L. McKay underlines that establishing a “sphere of intercultural” requires two essential steps. First of all learners need to acquire knowledge about another culture and then they need to reflect on how their knowledge contrasts with it. In this context one goal that can be encouraged when asking students to reflect on another culture is for them to consider what meaning particular behavior might have for members of that culture, and not to assume that it is the same as the one they have.

Teaching culture as difference is also very important. Frequently, the introduction

of cultural content is limited to view culture as “geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behavior” (cited in S.L. McKay 2002: 83). In using the English language in cross-cultural encounters students need to be encouraged not to adopt this view but rather to recognize the diversity that exists within all cultures.

Learning about another culture does not necessary mean that one must accept that culture. C. Kramsch (1993), for example, argues that knowing about a culture (gaining cultural competence) does not mean that one has an obligation to behave in accordance with its conventions. Whereas an individual may learn about pragmatic differences that exist between cultures, the goal should not be for students to accept the culture, but rather to recognize how particular pragmatic differences might affect their own cross-cultural encounters.

Things become more complicated when we teach English for specific purposes. If culture is essential to the teaching of the English language as an international language, the following question arises in this context: in what ways is it essential? S.L. McKay (2002) suggests that in order to use English for special purposes, an individual needs to acquire the culturally influenced ways of using particular discourse. H.D. Brown (1986) states that culture is necessary because it appears to be an integral part of the interaction between language and thought, and cultural patterns, ways of life are expressed in the language; as for culture-specific world views, they are also reflected in the language.

One of the major reasons for the spread of English internationally is that it serves a vast array of specific purposes. It is used not only to record a large amount of knowledge in a great variety of fields, but it is also used as the medium of communication in numerous international organizations, business, trade and diplomacy. The English language serves as the medium for countless discourse communities. J.M. Swales contends that discourse communities share the following defining criteria: “there are common goals, participatory mechanisms,

information exchange, community specific genres, highly specialized terminology and a high level of expertise. On the other hand, distance between members geographically, ethnically and socially ... means that they do not form a speech community” (cited in S.L. McKay 2002: 97).

The rise of English as international language, along with the development of new technology, has enabled the development of discourse communities that are geographically, ethnically, and socially quite diverse. In terms of the teaching of International English one more question has to be answered: what knowledge do individuals need to partake in a discourse community? Firstly, they need expertise in its field, knowledge that is generally acquired outside a classroom. Secondly, they need knowledge of the specialized lexicon of the field that can be addressed at lessons of English. Finally, they need knowledge of the community specific genres. It is here that English classrooms can be most useful. Genres are composed of a class of communicative events such as news items or academic papers that serve a particular communicative purpose. This purpose shapes the structure of the discourse in each genre, and influences the choice of content and style.

J.P. Gee contends that mastering the discourse of a specific community is not a matter of learning a particular set of rules, but involves a process of apprenticeship and enculturation into the social and cultural practices of a discourse community. (J.P. Gee 1990).

The cultural content in English as a Foreign Language Pedagogy for specific discourse communities is quite different from

the primary cultural content. Whereas in some teaching contexts it will be important to consider what primary (geographically and ethnically based) culture should provide the basis for the content of materials, in other contexts, where learning English is related to specific occupational or professional purposes, the cultural content will be informed by the social and cultural literacy practices of the discourse community.

So, the use of English as an International Language within specific discourse communities involves a different notion of culture. The social and cultural knowledge that informs discourse a community is not tied to specific geographically and ethnically based cultures. It is based on the social and cultural practices of a particular group of people who are brought together for specific purposes. Since the cultural basis of such specialized discourse communities is not directly connected with any particular primary culture or cultures but transcends geographical and social as well as ethnic borders, these discourse communities can be defined as truly international communities..

REFERENCES

- Kramsch C. 2003. *Content and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McKay, S.L. 2002. *Teaching English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seidl M. 1998. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. Vol. 2.
- Seidl M. 1998. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. Vol. 3.